

April 1991

ACCESSIBILITY FOR THE DISABLED

Standards for Access to State Department- Designed Buildings Overseas



**National Security and
International Affairs Division**

B-243242

April 3, 1991

The Honorable Claiborne Pell
Chairman, Committee on Foreign Relations
United States Senate

The Honorable Jesse A. Helms
Ranking Minority Member, Committee on
Foreign Relations
United States Senate

In response to your request, we have determined what procedures and directives guide the Department of State in constructing or renovating facilities abroad to provide accessibility for persons with disabilities.

Results in Brief

When constructing or renovating facilities in other countries, the Department of State is subject to the 1984 Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards, which are building guidelines designed to provide disabled people with full access to and use of a facility. However, the State Department did not adopt these standards until March 1990. State Department officials stated that from 1984 through 1990 designs were completed for 23 buildings but that only 3 of these were designed after the State Department adopted these standards. Department officials told us that although the uniform standards had not been adopted, accessibility features, such as ramps and appropriately designed rest rooms, were incorporated in designs prior to 1990.

Background

The Congress enacted the Architectural Barriers Act (P.L. 90-480) in 1968 to "insure that certain buildings financed with Federal funds are so designed and constructed as to be accessible to the physically handicapped." Four U.S. agencies were designated to establish and enforce standards for design, construction, and alteration of all buildings subject to the act. These agencies were (1) the General Services Administration (GSA), (2) the Department of Housing and Urban Development, (3) the Department of Defense, and (4) the U.S. Postal Service. GSA sets the standards for all buildings subject to the act that do not fall under the auspices of the other three standard-setting agencies.

In 1973, under the Rehabilitation Act (P.L. 93-112), the Congress established the Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board. This Board investigates and works to resolve complaints on accessibility

matters and monitors corrective action. A 1978 amendment to the act assigned the Board responsibility for issuing minimum guidelines for the standards established by the four standard-setting agencies. These guidelines were published jointly by the four agencies in August 1982. The Board does not monitor or evaluate agency compliance in the absence of a complaint. According to Board and GSA officials, all government buildings, including State Department buildings overseas, are subject to standards set by one of the standard-setting agencies.

On August 7, 1984, the four standard-setting agencies published the Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards to set accessibility standards for federal and federally funded facilities in accordance with the Architectural Barriers Act. The Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards are to be applied during the design, construction, and alteration of buildings and facilities. The Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards were intended both to conform with the Board's minimum guidelines—which set requirements for the minimum space to be accessible—and to minimize the differences among the standards previously used by the four standard-setting agencies. In addition, these agencies wanted the Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards to closely follow standards issued for general use by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI).¹

State Department Slow in Adopting Uniform Standards

The Department of State's Office of Foreign Buildings Operations is responsible for most of the building construction and renovation activities of nondefense agencies overseas to which handicapped accessibility criteria and guidelines pertain.

Although the Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards were first published in 1984, the State Department did not adopt them until March 1990, when its new guidelines on design criteria took effect. According to State Department officials, before March 1990 ANSI standards were applied to specify technical design criteria, and the Uniform Building Code was used to establish minimum space requirements.²

¹The institute is a nongovernmental national organization that publishes a wide variety of recommended building codes and standards. In 1961, the institute established specific standards which formed the technical basis for the first accessibility standards adopted by the federal government and most state governments.

²The Uniform Building Code was first adopted in 1927 by the International Conference of Building Officials. Its purpose is to provide better building construction and greater safety to the public by uniformity in building laws.

State Department officials believed these criteria were basically the same as those contained in the Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards; therefore, they continued to apply them after the Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards were published. State officials acknowledged, however, that because the primary focus of the Uniform Building Code was on occupant safety, accessibility for the disabled was not comprehensively addressed. Our comparison of the criteria previously used by the State Department and those contained in the Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards showed that they were similar but that the accessibility requirements of the Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards were more specific.

The ANSI accessibility standards are basically a resource for design specifications, providing technical guidance for architectural or mechanical components that can be used in making functional spaces accessible. The standards address, among other things, curb ramps, seating, and the placement of telephones. According to a Board official, the ANSI technical provisions have been integrated into the Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards, which also address the scope of the accessibility features. The Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards specify the number of amenities to be made available to the disabled and establish procedures for determining this number, whereas the ANSI standards do not provide this degree of specificity. For example, the Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards require that for new construction, a minimum percentage of the total parking spaces must be accessible to the disabled. Similarly, if places of assembly are provided, a minimum percentage of the seating capacity must be set aside for wheelchairs. The ANSI standards, on the other hand, address only the size, location, and other technical features of these amenities. They do not specify any minimum number of parking or wheelchair spaces that must be available.

According to the State Department's March 1990 directive adopting the Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards, any building or facility to be constructed or substantially altered³ must comply with these standards. Leased facilities are to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, but they must comply to the extent practicable.

³Refers to measures that cost 50 percent or more of the fair cash value of the building.

Scope and Methodology

We reviewed the legislative history of the current organizational structure and standards pertaining to building accessibility overseas for the disabled. To gather information on the responsibilities and activities of associated agencies and organizations and on the implementing directives and procedures, we interviewed officials and reviewed documents at (1) the State Department and (2) the Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board. We also discussed these issues with officials of GSA and the Agency for International Development.

We did not evaluate whether the State Department has appropriately incorporated the Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards in all applicable building designs since adopting the standards in 1990. Also, we did not inspect buildings overseas to verify whether those designed prior to 1990 contain the designated accessibility features.

We performed our review between September 1989 and December 1990 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. We did not obtain written agency comments on this report. However, we discussed the report's contents with responsible agency officials and incorporated their comments where appropriate.

We are sending copies of this report to the Secretary of State, the Administrator of GSA, and the Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board. Copies will also be provided to others upon request.

If you or your staff have any questions regarding this report, please call me at (202) 275-5790. Major contributors to this report were Leroy W. Richardson, Assistant Director; Max E. Green, Evaluator-in-Charge; and William G. Stepp, Senior Evaluator.



Harold J. Johnson
Director, Foreign Economic
Assistance Issues

Ordering Information

The first five copies of each GAO report are free. Additional copies are \$2 each. Orders should be sent to the following address, accompanied by a check or money order made out to the Superintendent of Documents, when necessary. Orders for 100 or more copies to be mailed to a single address are discounted 25 percent.

**U.S. General Accounting Office
P. O. Box 6015
Gaithersburg, MD 20877**

Orders may also be placed by calling (202) 275-6241.

**United States
General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548**

**Official Business
Penalty for Private Use \$300**

**First-Class Mail
Postage & Fees Paid
GAO
Permit No. G100**
